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Leonore Fleischer Talks with Philip Friedman

PHILIP FRIEDMAN is a mathematician, lawyer, and film-maker whose latest novel, *Termination Order*, has just been published by Dial Press. Startled by a disturbing resemblance between it and recent headline stories, we talked with him about the plot.

How much truth, we wondered, is there to the story of a Central Intelligence Agency which instigates a public scrutiny in order to strip itself of its "dead wood"—emerging from it more secretive than ever, and subject only to its own laws? The novel follows the attempt of a lone operative, Gregory Moore, to identify a "mole" which has burrowed into the CIA, while the reader, as well as the hero, is left very uncertain as to whether the mole is ours or the Russians'.

"The book," Friedman explained, "is in many ways an amalgam of impressions and information that I've absorbed over 15 years direct and indirect contact with people in the espionage business since I was in college . . . when I was recruited, unsuccessfully, by the CIA. The brochure . . . like General Electric or IBM . . . showed a bunch of clean-cut guys in an office, with a computer, which was, back then, the ultimate toy.

"I considered it, and there was an appointment made for me to go to the next higher level, but my first assignment, had I accepted it, would have been to take Army duty and wind up shooting Vietnamese, and that wasn't what I had in mind. Vietnam was a morale-changer: People I knew left the CIA because of Vietnam; a lot of them were very turned off and it was these people who continued to run through my life, people who have more involvement than I had ever got to, but who ended up with about the same perspective.

"There are genuine psychopaths in that business, but there are also some well-intentioned, semi-liberal people who are very confused, and one of the things that bothered me over the years and evolved into *Termination Order* was: what about all these people?"

Does an organization like the CIA use the tactics described in your book—beyond-the-law tactics—to perpetuate it-



Photo of Philip Friedman by Ellen Count

self and make itself stronger? "Yes." Was John Arthur Paisley caught up in that?

"Yes, that's what I've been told. There's this supposedly antagonistic organization on the other side, but there are connections between the two that are more complex than simple antagonism. And it goes beyond what you sometimes see in popular fiction—'comrades in arms, because we're both out doing the same kind of work in an unfriendly world.' It's actually far more interlocked. There are things I learned, some after my book had been written, that showed me just how close it is to the truth. And it scared me, for the first time.

"There are a couple of people I visit in Washington and I know they're up to something. I really do know that, but I don't know what. They talk to me, in some cases very openly about things that are verifiable around the edges, so that you must conclude that the meat in the middle is real. The reason they talk to me is that it serves some other thing that they're up to. And there are all these 'mole' questions now, like where exactly does Paisley fit in?

"He was a top analyst of Soviet weapons systems and was involved in the development of the spy satellites. There is

some question as to what his real position and identity were. The first thing we know is that the CIA, in essence, denied his existence. There was one theory, widely held, that he would show up in a May Day parade in Russia, that he was not really working for our side but for their side. The implication then, is, of course, that Paisley wasn't killed. That whole business surrounding the body . . . why was 'somebody' killed and put in his place, and who did it? Were the Soviets extracting him? Or was it the CIA, so that the Russians would stop worrying about him? And does it matter?

"A lot of the things I'm concerned about—the turmoil in the intelligence business, the disorganization, the clear sense that people are working at cross-purposes for motives other than the motives ascribed to them by the public or the popular press or the enabling legislation—seem to be keyed at the moment to what's going to happen with verifying the SALT agreement. If you look at it from at least one point of view, you can draw a picture of the Soviet Union throwing sand in the eyes of the U.S. in a way so massive as to be impossible to ignore. On the other hand, that's not the only way of looking at it.

"It's not clear, and I don't think it can be made clear, but that "sand" definitely serves one of the many factions that are now bloodily at war in Washington and elsewhere, and it's very hard to give the sand simple credence. I'm left with a picture of wheels within wheels. And I don't know where to stop. Will a magnifying glass show the smallest wheel, or will you need an electron microscope? I think it comes down in the end to what Gregory Moore decides in the book: you have to look at the reality as you can possibly perceive it and decide whether that reality is going in a good or bad direction and, if bad, whether you can do anything to oppose it and what.

"You may never be able to tell with absolute accuracy what the truth is and what the semblance is, what you're being directed to see and what's really there. But the only way to come even close, the only way to make a decent judgment for yourself is to find out as much as possible and that, it seems to me, is always to the good. The more we know, the less likely we are to be fooled in the end." □

LEONORE FLEISCHER covers the New York publishing scene for *Book World*.